Decision Notice
and
Finding of No Significant Impact
for
Lone Pine State Park Forest Management Project
Environmental Assessment

Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Region 1
490 N. Meridian Road
Kalispell, MT 59901

December 19, 2005

Description of Proposed Action

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes a prescriptive tree harvest to address growing disease and insect infestations at Lone Pine State Park.

Background

This project was initiated because of growing concern by park users, neighbors, and park management over conifer mortality at Lone Pine State Park due to infestations of dwarf mistletoe, Douglas fir bark beetle, and prolonged drought. A forest analysis was conducted in 2000 to gauge the condition of Lone Pine's forested lands. Contract forester Jim Cancroft determined that over 40% of the park's Douglas fir trees were infested with dwarf mistletoe and/or Douglas fir bark beetle. He estimated that approximately 7% of the park's Douglas fir and western larch stand was standing dead, and that a far higher percentage was likely to die in the near future. In 2004 Cancroft repeated his survey of the Lone Pine forest and concluded that approximately 20% of the Douglas fir/western larch forest is standing dead, documenting a substantial increase in four years.

Additionally, park users, neighboring property owners, and park management have been concerned about wildfire danger associated with Lone Pine State Park. Although the current fuel loading at Lone Pine is not excessive, it is anticipated that conditions will worsen if the current conifer mortality trends continue.

To address these concerns, FWP has contracted with Mr. Cancroft to assist with the development of prescriptive alternatives to begin the process of long-term forest management at Lone Pine.

Alternatives

The following is a brief description of the three alternatives that were developed in the EA:

Alternative A: Single-entry Treatment
Under this alternative, the entire park would be zoned into one of five management area types, utilizing a single entry to conduct logging activities. All tree removal operations would take place during the winter months in a single year, thus minimizing the impacts and restrictions on park visitors. Additionally, project cost and overhead would be substantially reduced by utilizing a single-entry alternative.

Alternative B: Multiple-entry Treatment
This alternative would utilize the same zoned approach as the preferred alternative, but would adopt a phased implementation schedule, utilizing two or more entries to treat the entire park. Under this alternative, the lightly used west side of Lone Pine would be treated and monitored for a period of two to five years to assess the effectiveness of prescriptive actions and associated rehabilitation work. Subsequent treatments would follow for other regions of the park, using information gathered from monitoring. Fuels mitigation areas on the east side of the park and near the caretaker's residence would be included in this alternative to create defensible space near neighboring dwellings.

Alternative C: No Action
The no-action alternative leaves the future of Lone Pine's forestlands to natural processes. Under this alternative, no prescriptive tree removal would take place, and FWP would allow the current epidemics of Douglas fir beetle and dwarf mistletoe to run their course. FWP would take a reactive role and address resulting forest conditions as they develop.

Public Comment

Public scoping began on February 15, 2005, with a panel discussion involving Flathead Valley forestry and recreation professionals. A public open house was held on May 17, 2005, to solicit public input for project development. A public field trip and open house were held at Lone Pine State Park on July 26, 2005, to view the project area and solicit additional public input. Public comment was solicited on the draft EA from November 2, 2005, through December 5, 2005. A total of 13 written or verbal comments were received. Seven of the respondents supported Alternative A or a modified version of Alternative A. Six respondents supported Alternative B or a modified version of that alternative. One respondent supported the no-action alternative (C).

Issues

Noxious Weed Control
Concern regarding the spread of noxious weeds as a result of this proposal was significant. Over half of the respondents commented that they had serious concerns about the spread of noxious weeds as a result of ground disturbance caused by timber removal. FWP agrees with the importance of noxious weed abatement at Lone Pine and has committed to increased efforts in the coming years. The Lone Pine State Park Management Plan of 2003 states the objective of developing a noxious weed control plan by 2005. During the summer of 2005, FWP contracted with a local botanist to inventory noxious weeds within Lone Pine.

FWP received the completed inventory on November 25 of this year, and the subsequent treatment recommendations will arrive in December.

Damage to Understory and Loss of Native Plant Communities
Concern regarding the loss of understory diversity, and particularly native plant communities, was significant. Six respondents commented that they felt that ground disturbance associated with timber removal would threaten native wildflowers and shrubs, and would result in a loss of understory diversity. FWP shares this concern and has made rehabilitation of disturbed soil and understory an important component of this proposal. FWP would require contractors to design and implement a rehabilitation plan immediately following any timber removal. Additionally, FWP intends to seek professional consultation on follow-up rehabilitation efforts such as native transplanting and seeding. One of the stated desirable outcomes of this project is to permit light and moisture penetration to enhance understory diversity.

Visual Impacts
Four respondents commented that they were concerned about the loss of visual screening from surrounding residential properties or from other park users. These respondents felt that this proposal would diminish the opportunity for solitude afforded by the relatively dense canopy that is prevalent at Lone Pine. There was also concern that this project will damage the overall park aesthetics if the prescription is too aggressive. Conversely, two respondents commented that they felt park aesthetics would be enhanced by timber removal. In this proposal, visual screening would be left intact in locations where residential properties are in close proximity to the park's trail system. A random thinning pattern would create areas of greater visibility, at least temporarily, until forest regeneration occurs. FWP feels that the park's aesthetics will be conserved in the long run by instituting forest management practices to address severe disease and insect infestations.

Fuels Loading
One respondent commented that forest fire danger associated with fuels availability could increase as a result of this project. The concern was that opening the forest will promote the growth of grasses, shrubs, and small trees, which will add to available ladder fuel and fine fuels. FWP acknowledges that it is impossible to removal all potential for wildfire at Lone Pine State Park; however, FWP feels that long-term fire prevention will require careful management activities to prevent long-term fuel loading of heavy fuels. Consultation with forestry and wildfire experts over the course of this project development has consistently supported this supposition.

Loss of Wildlife Habitat for Cavity Nesters
One respondent voiced concern regarding the loss of wildlife habitat and, in particular, that of cavity nesting birds such a pileated woodpeckers. A stated desirable outcome of this project is to enhance wildlife habitat by promoting forest and understory diversity that is currently lacking or declining. FWP would carefully select key habitat areas within the project area to be left intact. No completely dead snags would be removed unless they pose a direct hazard to park users in developed areas of the park or on primary trails.

Need for Future Manipulation of the Forest
One respondent voiced concern that this project would create a need for future forest manipulation to achieve the stated goals. FWP considers this proposal to be the beginning of the dynamic process of managing Lone Pine's forest. This project is intended to promote changes that will result in greater diversity and vigor, and it is expected that future projects will be required. Post-project monitoring will guide future actions.

Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)
Based on analysis in the EA, I find Alternative B to be the preferred alternative. Significant concern has been raised regarding the potential spread of noxious weeds, the loss of native understory plant communities, and the loss of solitude or change in park aesthetics. Out of respect for these concerns, I have decided that Alternative B, multiple-entry treatment, will offer FWP and park visitors an opportunity to measure the effectiveness of rehabilitation efforts and to gauge the visual impacts before initiating a park-wide prescription.

I have evaluated the EA and applicable laws, regulations, and policies, and have determined that this action will not have a significant impact on the human or physical environment. Therefore, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared.

The final EA and the FONSI may be viewed at or obtained from Montana, Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Region 1, Kalispell, Montana. Please direct request to the Region One Parks Division office at 490 North Meridian Road, Kalispell, MT 59901.

In accordance with FWP policy, an appeal may be made by any person who has either commented in writing to the department on the proposed project, or who has registered or commented orally at a public meeting held by the department on the proposed project, or who can provide new evidence that would otherwise change the proposed plan. An appeal must be submitted to the Director of FWP in writing and must be postmarked or received within 30 days of this decision notice. The appeal must describe the basis for the appeal, how the appellant has previously commented to the department or participated in the decision-making process, and how the department can provide relief. The appeal should be mailed to: Director, Fish, Wildlife & Parks, 1420 East 6th Avenue, Helena, MT 59620.

_____ _____
James R. Satterfield , Jr., Ph.D. Date
Regional Supervisor